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Article:

O'Brien, Thomas Anthony (2013) Emergent Regionalism in the Post-Soviet Space. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*. pp. 564-567. ISSN: 1478-2790

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2013.865408>

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Review Essay

Emergent Regionalism in the Post-Soviet Space

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New Regionalism or No Regionalism? Emerging Regionalism in the Black Sea Area (The International Political Economy of New Regionalisms Series)

Ruxandra IVAN (Ed)

Ashgate, 2012, ISBN 978-1-4094-2213-6

£60.00 (hbk), 250 pp.

The Dynamics of Black Sea Subregionalism

Panagiota MANOLI

Ashgate, 2012, ISBN 978-0-7546-7991-2

£60.00 (hbk), 270 pp.

The Politics of Energy and Memory between the Baltic States and Russia (Post-Soviet Politics)

Agnia GRIGAS

Ashgate, 2013, ISBN 978-1-4094-4653-8

£55.00 (hbk), 220 pp.

The end of the Cold War saw the removal of political barriers that had divided regions and made them largely off-limits to external actors. The Black Sea and Baltic Sea regions exemplify these divisions, both existing largely within the Soviet space, but also encompassing other proximate states. These spaces have increasingly opened up and the influence of European actors has shifted east bringing the borders to the EU to the edge of the former Soviet sphere of influence. Despite this proximity, the heterogeneity of the states within these regions means that attempts to create distinct regional identities have foundered, particularly given growing Russian assertiveness. The books in this essay consider the nature of the relations between states within these two regions and how they have managed their emerging regional identities.

The question of whether there even is a Black Sea region is addressed from several perspectives in *New Regionalism or No Regionalism? Emerging Perspectives in the Black Sea Area*. As Ivan notes in the Introduction, “one of the peculiarities of the Black Sea area... [is] the coexistence of multiple cooperation initiatives with numerous tensions between riparian and neighbouring states.” (p.1) In order to consider this coexistence the collection adopts an eclectic approach, “combining different theoretical perspectives, different

disciplines... different historical periods, and different objects of study” (p. 8) with varying degrees of success. The book is divided into four parts, addressing history and geography (Part I), the influence of external actors (Part II), national perspectives (Part III) and the Black Sea region in comparative perspective (Part IV).

Adopting a historical perspective on the geography of the region, Bauer and Doonan (Chapter One) argue that geographical realities – uniform sea currents and obstructive land forms – played an important role in determining patterns of interaction. Contemporary attempts to develop political initiatives are therefore challenged by the embedded historical identities and connections across the region. Geographical isolation and location within the Russian sphere also limited intrusion by external influences. Milecschi (Chapter Six) argues that Russia continues to view the Black Sea as its neighbourhood and that losing this position would undermine its status as a global power. In an apparent recognition of this reality, Nițoiu (Chapter Five) argues that the European Union continues to treat the region as a buffer zone between East and West. These competing pressures provide some explanation of the challenges in forging a Black Sea identity.

Although a distinct Black Sea identity has not emerged, there have been several attempts to develop organisations that could facilitate cooperation in this direction. These attempts have been driven by the interests of external actors, relating to energy and security, in conjunction with regional actors seeking to establish and secure their own position in the new environment. Examining Romanian policies towards Black Sea cooperation, Ivan (Chapter Eight) argues that Romania’s desire to be seen as a regional leader has been undermined by persistent tensions with neighbouring states. By contrast, Azerbaijan (Chapter Seven) has been more successful, leveraging its energy assets to establish a degree of influence, utilising connections to Russia and Turkey to chart a more independent course. The lesson from both chapters suggests that the focus on regionalism tends towards instrumentalism in pursuit of domestic gain. Comparing Black Sea and Caribbean regionalism Preda (Chapter Ten) argues that initiatives by states to foster regional integration have been undermined by the desire to satisfy external actors. The peripheral location of the Black Sea in the eyes of Western European states makes regional states unwilling to commit to region-building in favour of a search for something better (such as EU and NATO membership).

This collection provides an extensive and in-depth examination of the challenges facing the development of a Black Sea region. Chapters examining historical origins (Bauer

and Doonan), EU influence (Nițoiu), regional actors (Milevschi and Ivan) and cross-regional comparisons (Ghica and Preda) were well realised. The analysis would have been strengthened by giving more consideration to the role played by the other major Black Sea state, Turkey. Although the eclectic approach allows the contributors to address a range of issues, it also leads to fragmentation of the core argument and loss of focus in places. The collection would have been strengthened by encouraging contributors to maintain a tighter focus on the concept of the Black Sea region to enable a more unified message to emerge. The collection overall does provide a useful examination of the issue of Black Sea regionalism and the factors that challenge the development of a stronger regional identity.

In *The Dynamics of Black Sea Subregionalism* Panagiota Manoli delves deeper into the dynamics of Black Sea regionalism by considering the emergence and role of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC). Following Ivan, Manoli notes that the “contemporary Black Sea has been a scene of conflict and fragmentation rather than cooperation and interdependence.” (p. 1) By focusing on the BSEC and the actors and events that have shaped its development, Manoli is able to identify tangible examples involved in forging cooperation and is also able to reflect on the concept of a Black Sea subregion. The concept of subregionalism underpins the analysis (Chapter One), identifying the Black Sea as existing within broader and more established regional identities. A central element of subregionalism is a greater degree of mutual dependence within a particular geographic space than outside. As noted above, the presence of mutual dependence is far from developed in the Black Sea, making this a difficult challenge. Despite undertaking a comprehensive review of the literature on subregionalism, the author could have provided a clearer assessment of how it could be applied in the context of the Black Sea area.

The emergence of the BSEC (Chapter Two) demonstrates the difficulties posed by tensions and power relations within the region. Formed in 1992 with eleven members (with Serbia joining in 2004) the BSEC has struggled to establish a position as a credible representative for Black Sea interests. Initially driven by Turkey, the organisation has developed competencies in a number of areas, but has faced resistance and wariness from Russia, which has undermined its effectiveness. The difficulty facing the BSEC in establishing itself as a credible institution is that “the existence of subregional institutions per se has provided the main argument for the existence of the Black Sea subregion itself.” (p. 43) In this sense, the location of the Black Sea between western Europe and the post-Soviet

space has made the formation of a subregional identity, bridging the two competing regions, particularly difficult.

Chapters Four to Six examine factors that have enabled and constrained the development of the BSEC, namely national priorities and economic relations. Of central concern to a number of states in the organisation is a desire to break free from Russian influence and move towards Europe. The growing strategic strength of Russia has in turn limited the willingness of states to deepen their engagement with the BSEC. An examination of economic flows also suggests that, despite the presence of regional institutions, actual interconnections are limited, shaped by historic trading patterns and desire to look west. The influence of the EU (Chapter Seven) has been the most significant factor in determining the direction in which the BSEC has developed in recent times. Existing within the broader European region, the interests of the Black Sea subregion have been subordinated to those of the larger formation. EU interest in the region has generally been low, conditioned by the needs of integration of new members and an awareness of Russian influence. Among BSEC member states, participation has also been shaped by the need to adhere to EU guidelines and unwillingness to risk losing their position.

This is an interesting and detailed study of the emergence of Black Sea subregionalism. While the BSEC provides a core around which the analysis is conducted, the complexity of the region means that the level of detail can overwhelm the argument. A stronger position on the (un)importance of subregional groupings and the significance of the BSEC in this regard would have unified the book. The theme that emerges is one of uncertainty on the part of BSEC member states about the purpose of the organisation, which in turn is conditioned by the internal and external pressures they face. The message from the book seems to be that subregions remain insignificant without strong shared identities and goals. In addition, the multiple partially overlapping subregional groupings that are identified in Europe and the post-Soviet space raise further questions about the utility of defining subregions.

Turning from the Black Sea to the Baltic, Agnia Grigas in *The Politics of Energy and Memory Between the Baltic States and Russia* attempts to re-examine relationships in the Baltic region. The question that underpins the study is “*What has driven contemporary Baltic foreign policies towards Russia?*” (p. 3 emphasis in original). The significance of this question lies in the changing position of the post-Soviet Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) following the break-up of the Soviet Union and their emergence as independent

states. The central argument is that although the states have all undergone similar transition processes, the decisions taken by each have diverged on key issues. Rather than acting as a group, the three states have operated along two axes (cooperative to adversarial and pragmatic to principled) when dealing with Russia (p. 7). This typology provides a framework on which to conduct the analysis and differentiate between the states and consider the drivers behind their distinct policies, illustrating how domestic concerns are linked to the international. Given its central position in the analysis the framework could have been elaborated a little more to bring out its full utility.

In developing an understanding of these positions, the book focuses on four areas of foreign policy relations between Russia and the Baltic states – oil, gas, commemoration of Soviet victory over Germany in WWII, and compensation for Soviet occupation (pp. 10-11). These areas, categorised as energy and memory, are similar in the tensions they elicit on both sides of the relationship. It would have been illuminating to have seen some consideration of relations over policy areas that were not so loaded with political and historical significance. The analysis of each of these issue areas considers the role of domestic political actors, business interests, ethnic politics, external actors (primarily EU and NATO), and Russia itself. This approach gives the narrative coherence and allows for comparisons to be drawn across the countries and issue areas.

Following an introduction to the domestic and foreign politics of the region (Chapter Two) the book examines the context of oil politics with a focus on pipelines (Chapters Three and Four) and gas politics with a focus on relations with Gazprom (Chapters Five and Six). These chapters contain significant depth of analysis of the relationships at stake, examining the role that each of the group of actors plays in each. In all of the cases domestic political orientations shape the overall trend, with leftist governments being less able to cooperate with Moscow for fear of being seen as soft. The EU and NATO are argued to be largely absent, providing only limited leverage, due to the proximity and interests of Russia. Of more significance are the role of business groups either resisting Russian investment (oil) or welcoming it (gas). These combined pressures have led to changing positions in all of the countries, with Lithuania being the most consistently adversarial and principled of the three states. By contrast, Russia has adopted a much more strategic approach to dealing with energy politics in the region, gradually reducing its reliance on the states as transit routes. This pragmatic stance is apparent in the relatively short interruptions to the Baltic gas sectors, which are much more heavily dependent on Russian investment than their oil sectors.

The politics of memory (Chapters Seven and Eight) are shaped by different priorities. In spite of these differences, the states have adopted positions relatively consistent with those in the area of energy, with Latvia adopting the most cooperative and pragmatic position. In characterising the approach to Soviet oriented Victory Day celebrations Grigas argues that “behaviour and policies at the national level stem, above all, from the nature and personalities of the different political parties.” (p. 135) In this area, the position of the Russian state has been more consistent, although slightly more flexible in the area of Victory Day celebrations. Shared experiences of occupation would seem to provide an opportunity for the states to develop a common stance on the respective issues, but as Grigas notes attempts at coordination did not succeed. Over time these issues have declined in importance for much of the public, rather being pursued by political elites, although the EU has had some moderating effect.

This is a comprehensive book that clearly shows the degree to which domestic politics shape decisions made at the international level, despite shared histories. While the focus of the analysis is on domestic decision-makers, it could have been strengthened by locating the individual states more in the regional dynamic. Greater consideration could have been given to why the states have been unable to develop a shared position on issues of particular importance. The integration of the states into the EU and NATO also appears as a relatively minor factor in their decision-making, reasons for this could have been developed more. Finally, consideration of parallels with other post-Soviet states would have placed the developments in a broader context. These minor reservations aside, this is a valuable examination of the complexities involved in regional relations in the post-Soviet space that defies simple classifications.

Together, these three books outline the difficulties involved in the development of post-Soviet regional identities. Both the Black Sea and Baltic regions exist where Western European and the Russian spheres of influence meet and overlap. Although a number of members have been integrated into western organisations (EU and NATO) geography means that they are still tied to their post-Soviet identities. This also works against the formation of strong subregional identities that would enable them to flourish within their respective geographical spaces. The books also point to the importance of history in determining the development and strength of regional identities. The books make an important contribution to understandings of the possibilities and challenges associated with the concept of forging regionalism in the post-Soviet space.